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ABSTRACT

Since the end of World War II, the United States has provided haven for nearly two million refugees who were involuntarily displaced from their homelands. In addition, during the last several decades, over one million legal immigrants have also found their way into the United States. Although the proportion of elderly may be small among these newcomers, immigrants and refugees play an increasing role in the "graying of America," as uprooted adults age in their new homeland. This digest argues that it is both feasible and appropriate to provide language and literacy instruction for older immigrants and refugees and discusses the needs and resources of these older learners. Factors that influence language and literacy acquisition are discussed, and promising programs and practices for serving older adults are highlighted. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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Growing Old in America: Learning English Literacy in the Later Years

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Since the end of World War II, the United States has provided haven for nearly two million refugees who were involuntarily displaced from their homelands. In addition, during the last several decades, over one million legal immigrants have arrived voluntarily and begun new lives here. We do not know how many undocumented refugees have also found their way into the United States. Although the proportion of elderly may be small among these newcomers, immigrants and refugees play an increasing role in the "graying of America," as uprooted adults age in their new homeland. This digest argues that it is both feasible and appropriate to provide language and literacy instruction for older immigrants and refugees and discusses the needs and resources of these older learners, or "elders." Factors that influence language and literacy acquisition are discussed, and promising programs and practices for serving older adults are highlighted.

Literacy and the Older Learner: Definitions

One difficulty in addressing the needs of older speakers of non-English languages is the widespread variation in how the notion of "older" is defined in research literature, in laws that affect older adults in America, and in communities in which they are members. The most common definitions are based on chronological age, which may vary from 40 to 65 years old. Another way to define older is by status. Individuals may be categorized as older workers on the basis of their status as midlife career changers, retirees returning to the labor force, displaced workers, or homemakers (Imel, 1991). In many communities, the status of elder is acquired through achievements and life roles, such as becoming a grandparent (Weinstein-Shr, 1988).

A second difficulty is the definition of literacy itself. Even as national measures of literacy become more functional and competency based, newer measures do not take native language literacy into account (Wiley, 1991). With few exceptions (e.g., the National Chicano Survey, cited in Wiley, 1991), current assessment tools used on a national level provide no way to distinguish between a Cambodian Khmai peasant farmer who has never held a pencil and a Russian engineer with a Ph.D. who has not yet learned the Roman alphabet.

No matter how age is reckoned or how literacy is measured, both the number and proportion of nonnative English speakers aging in America are growing rapidly. By any measure, this group has very few literacy resources available to them for managing the changes associated with growing old in an English-speaking setting.

Resources and Needs of Uprooted Elders

Refugees who make it to the United States are here because they are survivors. Escape stories provide testimony to the wits and fortitude of those who have come. These newcomers often show an amazing ability to draw on external resources, such as family and kin networks, while also possessing strong inner resources, including resilience in the face of enormous change. Those who migrate voluntarily often have material resources as well with which to tackle their adjustment to resettlement.

While some of the difficulties faced by elderly immigrants in the United States are similar to those experienced by all older Americans, many are peculiar to their special position of growing old in a foreign culture. Uprooted elders are in multiple jeopardy—they are, for the most part, poor, members of a minority culture, and non-English speaking. Demographic studies also indicate that the majority of this group are women (Special Committee on Aging, 1991), who often lack information or strategies for tapping available community services. When family and extended kin or social networks are not strong, lack of English proficiency can interfere with problem solving in almost all areas of elders' lives.

A second set of issues has to do with changing intergenerational roles in a new society. Erosion of traditional roles for elders has been documented among immigrant groups in the United States. As the contributions and assistance that elders can offer the family diminish, the elderly are put in an unfavorable position, with little to offer family and community. In addition, while native language loss among immigrant families was once a three-generational process, growing numbers of families are experiencing difficulty keeping a language of communication between two generations (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). As grandparents, parents, and children lose a shared language of communication, cultural transmission is interrupted, with negative consequences for members of each generation (McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

For language and literacy programs to be effective, they must build on the resources that elders bring. They must also provide language and literacy instruction that takes into account the special needs of elders in managing daily life and negotiating changing roles and relationships in their families and communities.

Factors that Affect Elders' Learning: Myths and Realities

While folk theories suggest that elders cannot learn languages or literacy, there is a growing body of research that indicates that adults may learn languages more quickly in the early stages than children, due in part to adults' more highly developed cognitive strategies for processing new information (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). Furthermore, if older people remain healthy, their intellectual abilities and skills do not decline (Oxford, 1985). There is no reason to believe that elders are not able to learn a new language or to become literate, except when negative attitudes of educators, family members, or the elders themselves interfere with their making the attempt. There are, however, considerations that will affect the degree to which language and literacy instruction for elders is effective.

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Physical factors. Because of decline in visual and hearing abilities for some learners, it is important to create a comfortable learning environment that compensates for these impairments. This may involve using educational materials with large print, using well lighted space, and eliminating background noise.

Cognitive factors. Older adults have strategies for learning that they have been using for more than half a century. For this reason, it is important to observe how they learn best, to be flexible in teaching approach, and to draw on their life experiences.

Social factors. Older adults may be uncomfortable in mixed-generational classes where the needs and pace of other learners do not match their own. In addition, elders may be motivated primarily by the desire to break their social isolation and to spend time with peers engaged in the positive endeavor of lifelong learning.

Other motivational factors. Since older adults rarely need certification or degrees, programs must directly address their other needs. Some specific motivations for learning language and literacy that have been identified in the research literature include retraining for work (Imel, 1991), gaining access to information or services, interacting more fully with English speakers in their communities, and communicating more effectively with children and grandchildren who no longer use the language of their country of origin (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, in press). In addition to instrumental motivations, learners may also have expressive motivations such as writing stories or poetry for their own sake.

Promising Programs and Practices for Older Adults

The first feature of effective programs for older learners of English is that the program design involves collaboration among specialists who bring different strengths to the endeavor. Gerontologists, ESL and literacy professionals, adult educators, and ethnic organizations serving the communities from which elders come are among the potential partners in this important work.

One innovative model for collaboration at the national level is the Literacy Education for the Elderly Project (LEEP). LEEP was a systematic effort by the National Council on Aging to link volunteer literacy programs with senior centers throughout the country. This project entailed the development of experimental programs in sites throughout the United States and resulted in a program development manual, a curriculum handbook, and a resource guide for providing literacy services to elders (Jacobs, 1986).

Another model for collaboration is exemplified by Project LEIF, Learning English through Intergenerational Friendship. This intergenerational tutoring program in Philadelphia links college-age tutors with refugee elders through a coalition of Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) and Temple University's intergenerational and ESL programs (Weinstein-Shr, 1988). The leaders of each MAA identify elders who want to learn English, articulate their most pressing concerns, and suggest sites for learning centers that will be familiar and comfortable for the elders. The university provides ESL tutor recruitment, training, and ongoing in-service support. Bilingual assistants provide cultural information to tutors and explain program objectives to participating elders.

A second feature of effective programs is that the curriculum draws on learner strengths and honors their goals for learning English and literacy. This requires learning about the role of language and literacy in the everyday lives of uprooted adults. This can be done with the assistance of community leaders and with input from learners themselves. Depending on the needs articulated by learners, programs may have any number of foci, such as practical problems of everyday living (e.g., reading medicine labels, comparison shopping) or leisure activities (e.g., conversation, reading stories or news articles). Other programs may focus on expressive aspects of language and literacy—reading the stories of other immigrants, writing poetry, using literacy to celebrate or lament the human condition (Kazemek & Rigg, 1985), or developing oral histories in which elders are helped to document their own life stories in the language that their grandchildren will understand. Programs that are most effective in meeting learner needs assess and reassess learner interests, experiment with a variety of materials and activities, and adjust curriculum as participants' needs and goals evolve.

Finally, the instructional approach takes into account the special needs and resources of elders. The most effective language and literacy teachers are often those who see themselves not only as teachers of language but also as learners about life. An interest on the part of language and literacy teachers in the experiences of elders, and a genuine belief in the wisdom of their years, creates the potential for respectful exchange and mutual learning.

Effective language and literacy programs benefit elders by helping them to manage as they age in a new setting. They also benefit young immigrants and refugees by creating channels for them to maintain connections to their past. But this work ultimately benefits all of us, by tapping the wisdom and cultural resources of elders and by signaling our commitment to a just and humane society in which we will all, barring disaster, inevitably grow old.

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